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ABSTRACT

Through the process of critical thinking and in a collaborative learning environment, foreign language instruction can be more than a required skill; it is an integral part of a liberal education. Critical thinking is part of the basic process of learning, not a higher order of thinking to be saved for advanced courses. Students thinking in foreign language and literature courses gain ownership of their learning as they dare to take risks and imagine beyond the confines of rote memory. Collaborative learning is an ideal setting for students to be able to share their discoveries and test their grasp of information among their peers. Overly ambitious textbooks, inexperienced instructors, strict disciplinary boundaries, prevocational curricula, and administrator's demands for accountability are some of the factors that contribute to foreign languages' low priority on college campuses. Our task is to devise ways to challenge students' old modes of thinking while simultaneously providing structures and support for the development of new ones. Even in elementary foreign language courses, students can be encouraged to think, e.g., to compare and contrast, give opinions, discover patterns, imagine, guess, evaluate given information to make and justify predictions, and reconstruct in their own words. In this way, students feel intellectually challenged and view the course as a worthwhile academic endeavor. (Author)

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MORE THAN A REQUIRED SKILL IN TODAY'S CURRICULUM: CRITICAL THINKING AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Abstract

Through the process of critical thinking and in a collaborative learning environment, foreign language instruction can be more than a required skill; it is an integral part of a liberal education. Critical thinking is part of the basic process of learning, not a higher order of thinking to be saved for advanced courses. Students thinking in foreign language and literature courses gain ownership of their learning as they dare to take risks and imagine beyond the confines of rote memory. Collaborative learning is an ideal setting for students to be able to share their discoveries and test their grasp of information among their peers.

Overly ambitious textbooks, inexperienced instructors, strict disciplinary boundaries, prevocational curricula, and administrators' demands for accountability are some of the factors that contribute to foreign languages' low priority on college campuses. Our task is to devise ways to challenge students' old modes of thinking while simultaneously providing structures and support for the development of new ones. Even in elementary foreign language courses, students can be encouraged to think, e.g., to compare and contrast, give opinions, discover patterns, imagine, guess, evaluate given information to make and justify predictions, and reconstruct in their own words. In this way, students feel intellectually challenged and view the course as a worthwhile academic endeavor.

Process and environment are keys to learning. Effective foreign language instruction encourages the learning process of critical thinking in a collaborative learning environment. When college students in foreign language and literature classes are challenged and encouraged to think critically (to the extent that they can discover systems and imagine applications), the results encourage involvement in interactive learning at levels that correspond to other academic disciplines. The non-threatening environment of collaboration encourages students to dare to think critically and provides the incentive for their taking ownership of their learning—the key to academic success.

It is detrimental to our profession that many persist in viewing foreign language study as a required skill to be mastered and not necessarily as an integral part of the general college curriculum. At the crux of the problem is that many educators, both within and outside our field, see foreign language study, particularly at the elementary and intermediate levels, as primarily mechanical manipulation of learned material. This is an outdated perception.

All too frequently our colleagues consider foreign language instruction as no more than a basic skill to be learned, preferably before coming to college. At my college, for example, at the onset of a curricular revision, a task force report divided the students' program into 1) general education (interdisciplinary courses and science); 2) required category (mathematics, foreign languages, and creative/performative expression; and 3) distribution requirements. The required category could be fulfilled by passing a proficiency test, in some cases meaning that a student would not have to take any college courses at all in these areas. The implication here was firstly to disassociate foreign languages from the general thrust of the college and secondly to see the courses as merely an exit requirement instead of part of the college experience.

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Many of our colleagues and students assume that foreign language classes consist of drills and tests on nouns, verbs, and vocabulary lists; tedious nightly assignments; a stiff grading policy; and the professor's insistence that students achieve total grammatical accuracy and perfect pronunciation. Some feel that literature courses deal with esoteric foreign writers who are unknown to American readers. Of course faculty opinion is frequently based on their own experiences in foreign language classes; many would report memories of poor grades and picky professors intent on humiliating students in class. Unfortunately, foreign language departments have fueled that argument by relegating language courses to junior faculty or teaching assistants and giving little prestige to research in pedagogy. Serious business, on the other hand, that is upper-level literature classes, are taught by senior faculty who are active and respected researchers.

Our colleagues remain amazingly uninformed about foreign languages. The following examples from my college are representative of general faculty perception. An experienced English professor confessed his concern that foreign language professors were probably too narrowly trained in linguistics to deal adequately with literature. In fact, just the opposite is true; most of us have literary training but spend a good deal of our time teaching language, often without formal training. A philosophy professor, curious about the nature of a foreign language instructors' research, finally concluded after my explanations about literary and linguistic focuses, that we must do essentially what English professors do, but in another language. The most telling remark came from a psychology professor concerned that too many of her advisees were having to take a foreign language, based on the placement test. She retorted that students have better things to do in college than to have to study a foreign language.

So where is foreign language learning in the scheme of serious academic endeavor? Many current perceptions of foreign language learning are linked to the history of language and linguistics in the United States, combining the legacies of the grammar translation method, the audio-lingual approach, and Chomskyan linguistics. Despite these false starts, there are some encouraging signs. Efforts are being made to address subject matter outside of the traditional domain of foreign language instruction, such as Latin American history taught in Spanish or Spanish for Business. Some (Chaput 1991: 36 Klein 1991: 29), however, are concerned that this "content-based instruction" implies that foreign language instruction in itself is meaningless unless framed in more pragmatic terms. In some colleges, foreign languages are being introduced across the curriculum in the manner of the familiar English-based Writing Across the Curriculum Programs. There seems to be a general national interest in international topics, including the learning of foreign languages, particularly in order to compete in world markets. This means more students of traditional and non-traditional age are attempting such languages as Spanish, Japanese, and Russian for practical reasons. The movements to include study of Western and non-Western culture and the focus on American pluralism incorporate the languages and cultures we are teaching into a broader scope. Thus, one valid way to look at foreign language study is to see it as a means of making connections with other topic areas and with larger issues of human experience.

Unfortunately, there are several negative forces at work. In the first place, colleges are making increased demands for accountability. They want students to be able to be fluent in a language quickly, and with the least upset to the existing college program, and at the least cost, It is often assumed that after completing a two-year language requirement, one knows that language and is

fluent. Of course, this search for a quick fix is an impossible demand placed on us; besides, who says they "know" physics, philosophy, sociology or any other content area? The economic recession has forced students to shop for colleges where they can obtain a diploma with a given concentration (to guarantee employment after graduation); this may be a focus on physical therapy, for example, in lieu of the traditional liberal arts. Furthermore, textbooks have traditionally tried to cram so much into each book that instructors feel compelled to "cover" the material at the expense of innovative teaching methods. These unexciting courses and will not encourage students to pursue language study beyond the requirements.

An imagined hierarchy of academic disciplines, currently exists with science at the top, moving downward to business through social science to liberal arts. The latter category moves down from mathematics to philosophy to history and English, and finally to foreign languages and music. Education is somewhere in a third-tier category. We pay instructors according to these guidelines, so it is not surprising that students judge the disciplines in much the same way. Since many think that science is more complex (and more relevant) than foreign languages, beginning college students often see science as the source of authority and certainty. Nevertheless, they might also be encouraged to include personal and subjective elements as part of the thought process.

Many assume critical thinking to be a higher order of thinking, often related to logic and the scientific method. Smith instead refers to "commonplace thinking" (1990: 11) that is going on all the time, that everybody does, and that is not unusual or special. And more importantly, commonplace thinking is complex, fundamental, and not restricted to one discipline. Granted, there is a difference between knowledge acquired and used in everyday life and that available in chemistry and physics. Nevertheless, the difference is related to the subject matter and the level of generality achieved. It cannot be that chemistry and physics are "scientific" and therefore superior, while other knowledge is inferior in quality (Meehan 1988: 20).

There is a general assumption that higher-order thinking is a superior mix of high-value attributes or components, such as planning, predicting, monitoring, evaluating, and asking questions, produced through such procedures as analysis, synthesis, induction, and deduction. This so-called higher-order thinking is presumed to be more complex, requiring more attention and a superior brain. Obviously, then, if this were true, not everyone could be expected to be capable of reaching elevated levels of thought. The implication is that professors or students who do well at academic subjects (probably meaning earners of high grades) are the only natural and accomplished higher-order thinkers.

This attitude is frequently carried over into foreign language and literature classes. We assume that beginning language learners need to be involved in memorizing vocabulary lists and verb charts in order to have the tools to communicate accurately. On the one hand, for some of our colleagues, collaborative learning, now frequent practice in secondary schools, might be too far from serious academic endeavor. And on the other hand, undergraduates don't want to take foreign languages to be treated as children, having to role play and recite mind-numbing details about what their parents do, how many brothers and sisters they have, and what they did last summer. Not until students reach advanced conversation and composition courses (and naturally by then the weaker ones will be weeded out) will we ask them to "think" in class. In literature classes, students usually start with a survey of literature class in which everything is presented

in chronological order so that they have the basis for thinking in-depth about specific genres and authors.

This categorization of thinking into lower and higher order is erroneous and results in deceptive behavior. Our brains are constantly solving problems as we learn, remember, or make sense of something. Smith (1990: 44) emphasizes that remembering, understanding learning, and thinking are all part of a single, continual, undifferentiated event—the brain at work, going about its own affairs. If some psychologists label infant language learning as problem-solving based on learning by experiment and hypothesis testing (Smith 1990: 17), how can we determine that no problem solving should go on in our classes until advanced-level courses? Thinking is easy and effective if people are in control of their own affairs, but thinking is difficult when imposed on us by someone else.

The implications for us as educators are clear. If we allow students to think about things they are naturally involved in, they will make sense easily of what they are doing. However, if we thwart this process by insisting that they concentrate on irrelevant information within contrived situations, learning might be difficult, inefficient, and unrewarding.

The key to teaching students to think is not to have specific courses in critical thinking, but rather to establish a learning environment that gives students license to think. Students often demand one right answer to a problem and are disoriented when they are faced with alternative correct answers. We have to devise ways to challenge students' old modes of thinking while simultaneously providing structures and support for the development of new ones.

So where do we go from here to upgrade foreign language instruction from basic skills building to critical thinking? Keep in mind that 'thinking' students are engaged in their work and can claim ownership of their learning. This feeling of accomplishment together with an independence from authoritarian professors encourages students to persevere. They consider themselves intelligent for being able to figure out things instead of having lists given to them that they have to regurgitate. Furthermore, students appear to retain what they discover themselves better than a series of seemingly unrelated or meaningless facts and grammatical structures. In the collaborative setting, students feel comfortable working with peers as helpers, and in essence they are pre-testing themselves before assessment by the professors.

There are several steps to get students to think critically in foreign language classes. First, the professor should establish a comfortable learning environment for students so that they are not afraid to take risks and to dare to express their own opinions about language or literature. The professor leads students through activities in which they think as they experience language. Tasks and time to carry them out are clearly defined, models for procedures are given at the onset, students help each other carry out these tasks, the professor circulates to monitor group work, and evaluation procedures are discussed. This means that students know what is expected of them and how to get there.

The following activities encourage students to think and are appropriate for various levels of foreign language instruction. First by becoming acquainted with language in context, students can discover patterns and then use them in new situations. Later, they can personalize information, compare their own and classmates' opinions, summarize what others have said, imagine other

possibilities, identify major conflicts, recreate a conversation between different characters than the one just heard or read, or predict the future.

In elementary Spanish, for example, students can imagine a bizarre past summer or weigh the appropriateness of a parent's travel recommendations instead of having to answer the typical questions about what they did last summer. They can use a few clues to guess other details, evaluate given data to make and justify predictions, create episodes for a soap opera, respond to a letter, organize information according to a prescribed order, or write a story as a group. Other options might include imagining a story based on a picture sequence or circulating among classmates to gather certain information.

In beginning literature classes, after having finished a work, each student can identify a topic of interest related to the reading—theme(s), style, relationship to another work, point of view, narrative perspective, etc. Then, the instructor and class can refine and list each student's topic so that all students can complete their assignment: 1) preparing a short statement/treatment of the designated topic; 2) preparing several questions to ask students on the topic; and 3) preparing other students' topics to the extent that they will be ready to answer the others' questions. Evaluation of the presentations includes how they present their own topic as well as how they respond to questions posed by others. Students are very receptive to this approach because they have created and developed their own textual focus, in many cases their discussion topics will be very creative.

An alternative to this procedure is to prepare a list of possible discussion topics. When students arrive in class they divide into small groups, they might select a topic from the list and get started on the group procedure. Sometimes, the presentation is oral (in the same or following class session), or it might take the form of a written group essay. In all cases, there is class discussion after students have had time to prepare the topics.

'Thinking' students are not only healthier academically, but they are happier with themselves. Our goal is not to settle for students regurgitating information, whether it be grammatical structures or plot summaries. Instead, students should be able to deduce language and stylistic patterns within manageable guidelines. As educators, we must allow them to test their hypotheses among their classmates and learn to give and take constructive criticism. The results are more stimulating classes and truly engaged students who want to continue their foreign language study.

In conclusion, our future tasks are clear. As foreign language professionals, we may think that we direct our own public relations campaign. The fact is that students are the ones spreading the word. Remember, we are dealing with thinking adults whom we are encouraging to think critically. Thinking people won't stand for being talked at in class; they want to do their own thing. Of course, foreign language instruction is a serious matter, and naturally students have to master grammatical structures and principles of literary analysis, but class time should be devoted to using this information actively, not merely to listening to discussion about it. If they are pleased with their active involvement in learning a foreign language to the extent that they have been encouraged to stretch their mind and imagination, they will be all to happy to tell our colleagues.

The road is clear. We start by providing a learning environment for students to be able to think critically. Our next task is to communicate with our colleagues and discuss (not just among ourselves, but for the wider college community) what goes on in foreign language classes today. We need to get involved in curricular planning and in teaching interdisciplinary courses to show that foreign languages are not just a required skill but part of process of involving students in thinking. If the goal of a college education is to prepare people for life, shouldn't the ability to think critically rank top on the list? It's a sure bet; we get our own house in order and we'll upgrade the neighborhood.

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